The ambivalence of human wisdom: Genesis 2–3 as a sapiential text

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1 The Language and Thought of Wisdom in the Paradise Story

Although scholars have sometimes treated the Paradise Story in Gen 2–3 as a specimen of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible, most are quite cautious about the connection.[1] It has been accepted for some time that wisdom thinking can be found outside of the classic wisdom texts, such as Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes,[2] particularly in texts like the Joseph story and the so-called Succession Narrative.[3] But is there any relationship between the Paradise Story and the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible?

A survey of the secondary literature reveals a considerable number of contributions that address this question and answer in the affirmative: yes, Gen 2–3 bear wisdom's imprint. Noteworthy are the works of Dubarle, Alonso Schökel, Mendenhall, Whybray, Festorazzi, Wyatt, Blenkinsopp, Carr, Stratton, Jaroš, Mül-

1 This is a translation, revision, and expansion of my earlier essay "Die Unteilbarkeit der Weisheit: Überlegungen zur sogenannten Paradieserzählung Gen 2f. und ihrer theologischen Tendenz," *ZAW* 114 (2002): 21–39.

2 Cf. Bernd Janowski, ed., *Weisheit außerhalb der kanonischen Weisheitsschriften* (VWGTh 10; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1996); see also the contributions in John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson, eds., *Wisdom in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); as well as Markus Saur, "Sapientia discursiva: Die alttestamentliche Weisheitsliteratur als theologischer Diskurs," *ZAW* 123 (2011): 236–49; Markus Sauer, ed., *Die theologische Bedeutung der alttestamentlichen Weisheitsliteratur* (BThSt 125; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2012); Markus Sauer, *Einführung in die alttestamentliche Weisheitsliteratur* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2012).

3 For the Joseph story, cf. originally Gerhard von Rad, "Josephsgeschichte und ältere Chokma," in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (TB 8; Munich: Kaiser, 1958): 272–80; Gerhard von Rad, "Die Josephsgeschichte," in *Gottes Wirken in Israel: Vorträge zum Alten Testament* (ed. Odil Hannes Steck; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1974), 22–41; see the discussion of the history of scholarship in Carolin Paap, *Die Josephsgeschichte Gen 37–50: Bestimmungen ihrer literarischen Gattung in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (EHS.T 23/534; Frankfurt: Lang, 1995). On wisdom thinking in the Succession Narrative, cf. R. Norman Whybray, *The Succession Narrative: A Study of II Sam 9–20; I Kings 1 and 2* (SBT 2/9; London: SCM, 1968); see the discussion in Walter Dietrich and Thomas Naumann, *Die Samuelbücher* (EdF 287; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), 216–20.

DOI 10.1515/9783110428148-020

ler, Görg, Albertz, Otto, Witte, Schmid, Mettinger, Forti, de Villiers, Berzosa Martínez, and Bauks.[4]

4 A.-M. Dubarle, *Les sages d'Israël* (LD 1; Paris: Cerf, 1946), 7–24; Luis Alonso Schökel, "Motivos sapenciales y de alianza en Gn 2–3," *Bib* 43 (1962): 295–315; trans. as "Sapiential and Covenant Themes in Genesis 2–3," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (ed. James L. Crenshaw; New York: KTAV, 1976), 468–80; George E. Mendenhall, "The Shady Side of Wisdom: The Date and Purpose of Genesis 3," in *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers* (ed. Howard N. Bream, Ralph D. Heim, and Carey A. Moore; Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 319–34; R. Norman Whybray, *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament* (BZAW 135; Berlin: de Gryuter, 1974), 105–6, 154; Franco Festorazzi, "Gen. 1–3 e la sapienza d'Israele," *RivB* 27 (1979): 41–51; Nicolas Wyatt, "Interpreting the Creation and Fall Story in Genesis 2–3," *ZAW* 92 (1981): 10–21; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 65–67; David M. Carr, "The Politics of Textual Subversion: A Diachronic Perspective on the Garden of Eden Story," *JBL* 112 (1993): 577–95 (Carr, however, identifies the conceptual approach of Gen 2–3 as an "anti-wisdom story" [577]); Beverly J. Stratton, *Out of Eden: Reading, Rhetoric, and Ideology in Genesis 2–3* (JSOTSup 208; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 223–50. Also see the note in R. B. Y. Scott, "The Study of the Wisdom Literature," *Int* 24 (1970): 20–45, esp. 35; Karl Jaroš, "Die Motive der Heiligen Bäume und der Schlange in Gen 2–3," *ZAW* 92 (1980): 204–15; Hans-Peter Müller, "Weisheitliche Deutungen der Sterblichkeit: Gen 3,19 und Pred 3,21; 12,7 im Licht antiker Parallelen," in *Mensch—Umwelt—Eigenwelt: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Weisheit Israels* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992), 69–100; see also Hans-Peter Müller, "Drei Deutungen des Todes: Genesis 3, der Mythos von Adapa und die Sage von Gilgamesch," in *Altes Testament und christlicher Glaube* (ed. Bernd Janowski and Michael Welker; JBTh 6; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1991), 117–34; Manfred Görg, "Weisheit als Provokation: Religionsgeschichtliche und theologische Aspekte der jahwistischen Sündenfallerzählung," in *Studien zur biblisch-ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (SBAB 14; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992), 73–96; Manfred Görg, "Sündenfall," *NBL* 13:742–43; Rainer Albertz, "'Ihr werdet sein wie Gott': Gen 3,1–7 auf dem Hintergrund des alttestamentlichen und sumerisch-babylonischen Menschenbildes," *WO* 24 (1993): 89–111; Rainer Albertz, "'Ihr werdet sein wie Gott' (Gen 3,5)," in *Was ist der Mensch …? Beiträge zur Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (ed. Frank Crüsemann, Christof Hardmeier, and Rainer Kessler; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1992), 11–27; Eckart Otto, "Die Paradieserzählung Genesis 2–3: Eine nachpriesterschriftliche Lehrerzählung in ihrem religionshistorischen Kontext," in *"Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit …": Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit* (ed. Anja A. Diesel et al.; BZAW 241; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 167–92; Eckart Otto, "Woher weiß der Mensch um Gut und Böse? Philosophische Annäherungen der ägyptischen und biblischen Weisheit an ein Grundproblem der Ethik," in *Recht und Ethos im Alten Testament: Gestalt und Wirkung; Festschrift für Horst Seebass zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Stefan Beyerle, Günter Mayer, and Hans Strauß; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999), 207–31. Klaus Koenen ("Gerechtigkeit und Gnade: Zu den Möglichkeiten weisheitlicher Lehrerzählungen," in *Recht—Macht—Gerechtigkeit* [ed. Joachim Mehlhausen; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1998], 274–303, esp. 302–3 n. 117) only marginally mentions Otto's evaluation of Gen 2–3 as a "didactic narrative," even though this bears great importance for his topic ("righteousness and favor"). See also Markus Witte, *Die biblische Urgeschichte: Redaktions- und theologiegeschichtliche Beobachtungen* (BZAW 265; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998); Schmid, "Die Unteilbarkeit der Weisheit"; Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A*

These discussions point to such central themes as the knowledge of "good and evil" (טוֹב/רַע), the "tree of life" known from the book of Proverbs,[5] reflection on human mortality and the related dust metaphor,[6] and motifs like the naming of the animals that recall ancient academic lists. Scholars often focus special attention on the terminology of the narrative, such as the "wise" (עָרוּם) snake and the desire of the woman "to become wise" (לְהַשְׂכִּיל), as well as a considerable number of other expressions that bear the imprint or influence of wisdom traditions.[7] Added to these are the sixteen instances of paronomasia in Gen 2–3.[8] In my estimation, these data leave no doubt that wisdom language and wisdom thinking play an important role in the Paradise Story.

2 Genesis 2–3 and the Alleged Solomonic Wisdom Traditions

In mainstream circles of exegesis, however, these kinds of observations regarding the Paradise Story appear only in footnotes in the scholarly literature well into the 1980s. Generally, interpreters were willing to acknowledge wisdom influences on the content that the Yahwist received and then edited, but no more than that.[9]

Literary and Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 2–3 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 129–30; Tova Forti, "The Polarity of Wisdom and Fear of God in the Eden Narrative and in the Book of Proverbs," *BN* 149 (2011): 45–57; Gerda de Villiers, "Sin, Suffering, Sagacity: Genesis 2–3," in *Exile and Suffering: A Selection of Papers Read at the 50th Anniversary Meeting of the Old Testament Society of South Africa OTWSA/OTSSA: Pretoria August 2007* (ed. Bob Becking and Dirk Human; OtSt 50; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 3–17; Raul Berzosa Martínez "Relectura 'sapiencial' de los relatos de creación del Génesis," *Compostellanum* 56 (2011): 139–64; Michaela Bauks, "Erkenntnis und Leben in Gen 2–3—Zum Wandel eines ursprünglich weisheitlich geprägten Lebensbegriffs," *ZAW* 127 (2015): 20–42; the discussion of Walter Bührer, *Am Anfang ...: Untersuchungen zur Textgenese und zur relative-chronologischen Einorndung von Gen 1–3* (FRLANT 256; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 290–305, esp. the bibliography in 290 n. 71 and his own conclusion in 303–4.

5 Prov 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4 (cf. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* [6th ed.; HKAT 1/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964], 7).

6 Cf. Müller, "Weisheitliche Deutungen der Sterblichkeit," 75–76.

7 The Hebrew term in Gen 3:1 alludes to the homonym ערום "naked" in Gen 2:25.

8 See Otto, "Paradieserzählung," 175 n. 44.

9 Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner, 1970), 373–74 n. 9; cf. Werner H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift: Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte von Gen 1,1–2,4a und 2,4b–3,24* (2d ed.; WMANT 17; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1967), 229 n. 1; Odil Hannes Steck *Die Paradieserzählung: Eine Auslegung von Gen 2,4b–3,24* (BibS[N]

This cautious approach was based in large part on the traditional early dating of the Yahwist to the Solomonic period. According to this view, the wisdom imprint of Gen 2–3 could be brought into connection with the "Solomonic Enlightenment" as proposed by Gerhard von Rad. The supposed connection between the Paradise Story and the Solomonic Enlightenment could also be construed as confirming the Solomonic date of the Yahwist, to whom Gen 2–3 was usually assigned. Caution in accepting such a connection is fully justified. The portrayal of wisdom in Gen 2–3 is extraordinarily complex, and takes place at a very advanced stage of the biblical discussion about the nature of wisdom. In my view, the conception of wisdom in the Paradise Story was inconceivable for the Solomonic era.[10]

I give an example here to illustrate this complexity: The book of Kings depicts Solomon as the classic example of a wise king. God appears to Solomon in 1 Kgs 3 and promises to grant him one request. Solomon asks for a "listening heart that can distinguish between good and evil" (v. 9). God praises Solomon expressly for this request, fulfills it for him by giving him a "wise and understanding heart" (לֵב חָכָם וְנָבוֹן, v. 12), and then, on top of that, God gives to Solomon riches and fame. In this text, the ability to distinguish between good and evil is the epitome of wisdom. According to the Paradise Story in Gen 2–3, however, humans remain deprived of this very ability; the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is off limits for them.

As a result of the nature of the traditions presented in 1 Kgs 3 and represented by Prov 10–22, it appears that Gen 2–3 does not belong to the older wisdom

60; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1970), 64 and n. 115; Werner H. Schmidt, "Gen 12,1–3 und die Urgeschichte des Jahwisten," in *Probleme biblischer Theologie* (ed. Hans Walter Wolff; Munich: Kaiser, 1971), 525–54, esp. 552 and n. 72 (for bibliography). An even more cautious evaluation appears in Horst Dietrich Preuß, *Einführung in die alttestamentliche Weisheitsliteratur* (UB 383; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987), 161.

10 A date in the Solomonic era is accepted still by Manfred Görg ("Die 'Sünde' Salomos: Zeitkritische Aspekte der jahwistischen Sündenfallerzählung," *BN* 16 [1981]: 42–59) and Knut Holter, "The Serpent in Eden as a Symbol of Israel's Political Enemies: A Yahwistic Criticism of the Solomonic Foreign Policy," *SJOT* 4 (1990): 106–12. More recent scholarship instead still dates the text in pre-Priestly time but places the text not too far from the time of Gen 1 (cf. Bührer, *Am Anfang* ..., 377–81; Walter Bührer, "The Relative Dating of the Eden Narrative Gen *2–3," *VT* 65 [2015]: 365–76), or even later; see Otto, "Paradieserzählung"; Joseph Blenkinsopp, "A Post-Exilic Lay Source in Genesis 1–11," in *Abschied vom Jahwisten: Die Komposition des Hexateuch in der jüngsten Diskussion* (ed. Jan Christian Gertz, Konrad Schmid, and Markus Witte; BZAW 315; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 49–61; Mettinger, *Eden Narrative*, 134–35, and the critical response by Erhard Blum, "Von Gottesunmittelbarkeit zu Gottähnlichkeit: Überlegungen zur theologischen Anthropologie der Paradieserzählung," in *Textgestalt und Komposition: Exegetische Beiträge zu Tora und Vordere Propheten* (FAT 69; Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 1–19, esp. 6–7.

traditions. The text can no longer be placed in the "Solomonic Enlightenment," which, in any case, scholars have now abandoned. A new departure in Pentateuchal scholarship is needed to investigate the wisdom thematic in the Paradise Story without this prejudiced view, and this is what this essay is pursuing.[11] Furthermore, more recent studies have begun to solidify the view that the Paradise Story is a wisdom text. Even though the story is naturally influenced by other traditions, it especially bears the imprint of the wisdom tradition. Yet this statement alone does not say enough. What is the position of Gen 2–3 within the wisdom of the Hebrew Bible?[12] Which point of view does this text present?[13] As will become clear from what follows, the Paradise Story argues for the fundamental ambivalence of wisdom. Genesis 2–3 narrates how the human species became "adult," that is, "knowledgeable," at the beginning of time, and it explains at the same time why their achievement of knowledge and wisdom produced a fundamental and inevitable distance from God.

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11 Cf. Thomas Römer, "Zwischen Urkunden, Fragmenten und Ergänzungen: Zum Stand der Pentateuchforschung," *ZAW* 125 (2013): 2–24; Thomas Römer, "Hauptprobleme der gegenwärtigen Pentateuchforschung," *TZ* 60 (2004): 289–307; Thomas Römer, "La formation du Pentateuque: histoire de la recherche," in *Introduction à l'Ancien Testament* (ed. Thomas Römer, Jean-Daniel Macchi, and Christophe Nihan; MdB 49; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2004), 67–84; Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz, eds., *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research* (FAT 78, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible* (Siphrut 3; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 7–16, 334–47; Georg Fischer, "Zur Lage der Pentateuchforschung," *ZAW* 115 (2003): 608–16.

12 On the extra-biblical comparisons see Arie van der Kooij, "The Story of Paradise in the Light of Mesopotamian Culture and Literature," in *Genesis, Isaiah and Psalms: A Festschrift to Honour John Emerton for his Eightieth Birthday* (ed. Katherine J. Dell, Graham I. Davies, and Yee Von Koh; VTSup 135; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 3–22. On the post-biblical reception in Wisdom of Solomon and 4QInstruction see Matthew Goff, "Adam, the Angels and Eternal Life: Genesis 1–3 in the Wisdom of Solomon and 4QInstruction," in *Studies in the Book of Wisdom* (ed. Géza G. Xeravits and József Zsengellér; JSJSup 142; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1–21.

13 The narrative extends from Gen 2:4b–3:24 and is a literary unity except for the so-called "Paradise geography" (2:10–15). Cf. Bührer, *Am Anfang* …, 261; for a different point of view, cf. Blum, "Von Gottesunmittelbarkeit zu Gottähnlichkeit," 10. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of growth in the previous oral tradition. See the anaylsis in Steck, *Die Paradieserzählung*. A strong redaction-historical differentiation appears in Christoph Levin, "Genesis 2–3: A Case of Inner-Biblical Interpretation," in *Re-Reading the Scriptures* (FAT 87; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 51–64. Cf. the discussion of more recent composition-critical oriented approaches in Blum, "Von Gottesunmittelbarkeit zu Gottähnlichkeit," 2–6, as well as the synopsis (11).

3 The Reception History of Gen 2–3 and its Domination over the Text's Interpretation

Scholars have noted since the early days of historical-critical interpretation that, after Gen 1, a second creation narrative follows in Gen 2–3. The second is not connected organically to the first, but is only linked to it.[14] This second creation narrative also belongs to the most well known and most interpreted texts in the Bible, giving rise to a variegated reception history that has often obscured the message of the biblical narrative itself.[15]

The elements from Gen 2–3 that appear prominently in reception historical memory are: (1) Paradise, (2) Adam, (3) Eve, (4) the apple, and (5) the Fall into sin. If one looks closely at the biblical text itself, however, the only element of that list that is present in Gen 2–3 is (3) Eve. I turn now to each of the other elements mentioned above, moving point by point: (1) The term παράδεισος ("paradise") originates from the Septuagint to render "the Garden of Eden" and is a Persian loanword. This term does not appear in the Hebrew text of Gen 2–3. (2) Adam is first named in Gen 4:1, while Gen 2–3 speaks only of "the human" (הָאָדָם). In Hebrew the difference between the two is clarified through the use of the definite article before the noun אָדָם. It is not a proper name because proper names do not need the article to become a determined noun. (4) The identification of the forbidden fruit is not disclosed in the Paradise Story. Although it is often thought to be an apple, this identification results from the Latin reception of Gen 2–3, which provides a wordplay in the homonyms *malum* ("evil"—"apple"). (5) Finally, the terms "sin" and "fall" do not appear anywhere in Gen 2–3. Biblically speaking, Gen 2–3 provides the conditions for the possibility of sin, while the actual "Fall" first takes place in Gen 4, the narrative of Cain's fratricide of Abel. Genesis 4:7 is the first appearance of "sin" (חַטָּאת) in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible.

4 The Narrative Flow of the Paradise Story

The Paradise Story is not a collection of dogmatic statements, but rather a narrative arrangement whose meaning can only be unlocked within the narrative se-

14 Cf. Bührer, "The Relative Dating of the Eden Narrative Gen *2–3."

15 Konrad Schmid and Christoph Riedweg, eds., *Beyond Eden: The Biblical Story of Paradise and Its Reception History* (FAT 2/34; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

quence. It is thus appropriate for the discussion to follow the narrative flow itself.[16]

This narrative begins with God's planting of the Garden of Eden and the creation of the human to be its gardener. The note that the human will be formed from עָפָר ("dust," Gen 2:7) indicates that the human is created as mortal from the outset.[17] This observation is worth emphasizing because interpreters have often argued that the human was originally immortal, and subsequently lost immortality as a result of the Fall. Another problem with that interpretation is the threat of punishment in 2:17, which takes the conventional form of a legal rule imposing the death penalty (and not the punishment of mortality).[18] Furthermore, in 3:19b mortality does not appear as a punishment against the humans; it is instead presupposed by the punishment.[19]

Two trees stand in the middle of this garden, the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The purpose of the Tree of Life is revealed in 3:24: whoever eats from it will live forever. But what is the meaning of "Knowledge of Good and Evil"? The sexual interpretation for this text that is mentioned occasionally—fed by the "knowledge" terminology and the scene of the fig leaves and its thematic focus of nakedness and shame—should be rejected as strongly as possible. This text does not employ the terminology for "knowledge" (דַּעַת) alone, which can indeed carry sexual connotations. The text is instead concerned with "the knowledge of good and evil" (הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע, 2:9). The sexual aspect plays a minimal role, as the question of human reproduction is not settled before the Fall. However, the further development of the narrative shows clearly that human reproduction can take place as a consequence of the "knowledge of good and evil"—to the degree that it is "good" to have offspring. However, this does not indicate that reproduction is a direct result of the acquisition of this knowledge. The divine declaration in 3:22 that the human has now become like God in that it knows good and evil (הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה כְּאַחַד מִמֶּנּוּ לָדַעַת טוֹב וָרָע) does not refer to human sexuality in any way.

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16 Hermann Spieckermann, "Ambivalenzen: Ermöglichte und verwirklichte Schöpfung in Genesis 2f.," in *Verbindungslinien: Festschrift für Werner H. Schmidt zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Axel Graupner; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2000), 363 – 76; Blum, "Von Gottesunmittelbarkeit zu Gottähnlichkeit."

17 Hans-Peter Müller, "Drei Deutungen des Todes: Genesis 3, der Mythos von Adapa und die Sage von Gilgamesch," *JBT* 6 (1991): 117 – 34.

18 The specific formulation in 2:17, מוֹת תָּמוּת instead of מוֹת יוּמַת, arises on account of the context: *God* is the one depicted as carrying out the capital punishment (cf. Gen 20:6 – 7; Num 26:65; Judg 3:22; Ezek 3:18). Contrast Blum, "Von Gottesunmittelbarkeit zu Gottähnlichkeit," 15 – 16.

19 Cf. Bührer, *Am Anfang* ..., 221 n. 256.

Further evidence for the knowledge of good and evil in the Hebrew Bible speaks against a sexual interpretation (especially noteworthy are Deut 1:39 – 40 and 2 Sam 19:36; see also 1QSa 1:10 – 11;). These texts show instead that "knowledge of good and evil" indicates a differentiation between life-supporting and life-damaging knowledge, which, as Deut 1:39 – 40 and 1QSa 1:10 – 11 demonstrate, is especially characteristic of adults. Children do not yet possess this knowledge, and the aged do not retain it (cf. 2 Sam 19:36). It should be emphasized that the knowledge of good and evil does not concern something—of whatever sort—that is avoidable for humans. That knowledge is instead a human trait that every adult human relies on each and every day. One can affirm the first sentence from von Rad's *Weisheit in Israel:* "No one would be able to live even for a single day without incurring considerable harm if he were not guided by a broad experiential knowledge."[20] This is the nature of the knowledge of good and evil.[21]

Returning to the Genesis narrative, God then provides instruction with regard to the trees of the garden.[22] The human may eat from all of the trees except for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat, for in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die." This means that, until this moment, enjoyment of the Tree of Life was still permitted. By eating of the Tree of Life, the human could attain immortality. This demonstrates that the Paradise Story does not treat the loss of an original immortality, but rather the missed opportunity to attain immortality.[23]

Through the mediation of the snake and the woman who was created from the human, the human decides instead to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. The preceding conversation between the snake and the woman is therefore of great import for understanding the narrative as a whole. The woman answers the snake's provocations as follows:

20 Von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel*, 13 (my translation).

21 Cf. Bauks, "Erkenntnis," 22.

22 Michaela Bauks, "Sacred Trees in the Garden of Eden and Their Ancient Near Eastern Precursors," *JAJ* 3 (2012): 269 – 303; Michaela Bauks, "Der Garten in Eden und seine Baume: Ein Beitrag zur Botanik aus Sicht der biblischen Symbolsprache," in *Zur Kulturgeschichte der Botanik* (ed. Michaela Bauks and Michael F. Meyer; AKAN-Einzelschriften 8; Tier: WVT, 2013), 37 – 71. Bauks ("Erkenntnis," 23) unconvincingly identifies the two trees in the middle of the garden.

23 James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Mettinger, *Eden Narrative*, 99 – 122.

> From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat, but from the fruit of the tree[24] *located in the middle of the garden*, God said, "Do not eat from it and *do not touch it*, so that you do not die." (3:2b–3, translation and emphasis mine)

The woman recounts God's original prohibition (2:17) in a more restrictive form: that one should not *touch* the fruit was not a part of God's command. The intensification of the prohibition indicates, in the first place, that the woman should be seen as being especially careful. She wanted in no way to transgress God's prohibition.[25] The woman's behavior seems even to foreshadow the latter mishnaic provision of "making a fence around the Torah" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:1). One may ask how the woman came to know about the prohibition (2:17), as she had not yet been created at that time. Apparently, the narrative is formulated in an elliptical way. It is tacitly assumed that the man and woman had talked about the prohibition, so that the woman knew about it.

Second—and this is decisive—the woman no longer relates the prohibition to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which was explicitly the case in 2:17. She instead relates the prohibition to the tree (in Hebrew עֵץ is a collective plural and does not necessarily need to denote a single tree) *in the middle of the garden* —the Tree of Life. But according to 2:9, *two* trees, the Tree of Life *and* the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, are located there.

Based on the fact that the woman relates God's command to the Tree of Life, one can infer that the humans had not eaten from the permitted Tree of Life, nor would they eat from it in the future. Therefore, the possibility that existed in the beginning—that the human might attain immortality rather than the knowledge of good and evil—is proved to be only an apparent possibility. Immortal life in paradise was not, in fact, a true alternative to the so-called Fall. As a result of pure caution, the first human couple never ate from the Tree of Life. Had they never eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the experiment of humanity would have ended with the death of the childlike first pair, who because of their child-likeness, would also have remained without progeny: children don't procreate.

The humans do, however, eat from the Tree of Knowledge and attain the ability to distinguish between "good and evil." The transgression of the prohibition is not connected here with the concept of sin. The Hebrew term for sin (חַטָּאת) appears first in the context of the fratricide of Abel in 4:7. The so-called Fall does not yet, biblically speaking, bring sin into the world. It instead provides the necessary condition of responsibility—namely, the ability to recognize good

24 The Hebrew word for "tree" (עֵץ) is a collective noun, and it can also mean "wood."
25 Differently Walter L. Moberly, "Did the Serpent Get it Right?" *JTS* 39 (1988): 1–27.

and evil. The murder of Abel is therefore the first actual "Fall," which also contains the appropriate terminology (4:7, לַפֶּתַח חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ).

Also noteworthy in 3:1–6 is the narrative presentation of the woman's motivation for taking the fruit. In 3:6, the prospect presented by the snake in 3:5, namely, that the humans would become like God (כֵּאלֹהִים), disappears without mention. The discourse mentions only that the woman desires to "become wise" (לְהַשְׂכִּיל)—a classic wisdom term. The hubristic interpretation of Gen 2–3 has therefore little textual support: The woman does not eat from the Tree of Knowledge with the intent of elevating humanity above God; she does not desire to take God's place. Rather, she desires to attain wisdom and knowledge.[26]

5 Conclusion

The Paradise Story revolves around an original withdrawal from, and then the successful acquisition of, practical knowledge that is necessary for human life. It is true that the narrative presents the acquisition of this knowledge as a result of transgressing a divine command. Nevertheless, the theological scope of the narrative does not emphasize God's intent to deprive the human of the faculty of knowledge; rather, it emphasizes that such knowledge itself is experienced as ambivalent. For this reason, the author of Gen 2–3 portrays knowledge as resulting in distance from God.

At the end of the narrative there is no doubt that the human attained the knowledge of good and evil. This is stated in the divine speech of 3:22, which is formulated in the perfect tense: "See, the human *has become* like one of us in that he knows good and evil!" This declaration has repeatedly caused consternation among interpreters. Many earlier scholars understood the plural "like us" (3:22) as a reference to the angels, denying that this phrase refers to the divinity of the humans. Others, like Luther, interpreted the expression ironically: "Est sarcasmus et acerbissima irrisio" (it is bitter mockery and sarcasm).[27] Nevertheless, the text itself is clear: the human has acquired special knowledge, and through

26 Cf. Thomas Krüger, "Sündenfall? Überlegungen zur theologischen Bedeutung der Paradiesgeschichte," in *Das menschliche Herz und die Weisung Gottes: Studien zur alttestamentlichen Anthropologie und Ethik* (ATANT 96; Zurich: TVZ, 2009), 33–46; see also Carol Newsom, "Gen 2–3 and 1 Enoch 6–16: Two Myths of Origins and Their Ethical Implications," in *Shaking Heaven and Earth: Essays in Honor of Walter Brueggemann and Charles B. Cousar* (ed. Christine Roy Yoder et al.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 7–22, here 11.

27 Martin Luther, *Vorlesungen über 1. Mose von 1535–45* (ed. J. K. F. Knaake; WA 42; Weimar: H. Bohlau, 1911), 166, l. 13.

this knowledge has become divine. It should be noted that Gen 2–3 does not speak of a delusional and hubristic human desire to become like God. Rather, through the knowledge of good and evil, the human has attained the state of *having become* like God.

As such, the Paradise Story is a myth of adolescence that applies to the species of humanity as a whole. It reports how humanity developed into bearers of responsibility as a result of its attainment of knowledge—with all the connected ambivalence.[28]

This attainment of practical knowledge carries within itself the consequence that the human must be cast out of Paradise so that humans can no longer eat from the Tree of Life. If humans were to do so, they would become completely like God—both knowledgeable *and* immortal. So the human is cut off from God's presence and banished from Eden.

The Paradise narrative, then, does not portray the loss of an unambiguously positive primordial condition that leads to a negative condition which endures into the present. The path is instead from one ambivalent situation to another.[29] The details of the life of the first humans in the Garden of Eden are omitted entirely by design. The only circumstantial clause appears in 2:25: "and they both were naked, the human and his wife, and they were not ashamed before each other." This clause serves primarily as preparation for 3:7, where the humans recognize their nakedness after the so-called Fall. While the *supralapsarian human* was close to God, he did not possess the knowledge of good and evil. The human had neither eaten from the Tree of Life, nor discovered sexuality as a medium for reproduction (2:25). The *infralapsarian human* must now live at a distance from God, but humans are nonetheless able to procreate (4:1, 17, 25, etc.) and carry out cultural achievements such as agriculture, crafts, music, and art (4:17–24).

The point of the Paradise Story is to explain why there is an insoluble connection between humans who conduct their lives independently by continually distinguishing between good and evil and who are a substantial distance from God. There is no way back to the primordial condition in Paradise. For one, the acquired knowledge cannot simply be forgotten. Second, according to the depiction in Gen 2–3, an angel stands guard with a flaming sword to keep Paradise

28 Cf. esp. Blum, "Von Gottesunmittelbarkeit zu Gottähnlichkeit," 15. See also Newsom, "Gen 2–3 and 1 Enoch 6–16," 18.

29 Cf. Spieckermann, "Ambivalenzen"; Friedhelm Hartenstein, "'Und sie erkannten, dass sie nackt waren…' (Gen 3,7): Beobachtungen zur Anthropologie der Paradieserzählung," *EvT* 65 (2005): 277–93, esp. 292–93; Paul Kübel, *Metamorphosen der Paradieserzählung* (OBO 231; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 157–62; Krüger, "Sündenfall?"

locked forever. Within the framework of the Pentateuch, Gen 2–3 represents a completely non-eschatological position. Beginning only with texts from the prophetic corpus like Isa 11:6–9 or Isa 65–66 is a return to primordial circumstances offered as a possible ideal.